

CASE INCIDENT 1 Leadership Mettle Forged in Battle

In 2008, facing a serious shortage of leadership-ready employees at the store management level, Walmart decided to recruit from the U.S. military. The company sent recruiters to military job fairs and hired 150 junior military officers, pairing them with store mentors to learn on the job. The result: Walmart claims that it's been able to bring in world-class leaders who were ready to take over once they had learned the retail business that Walmart could easily teach them. Other organizations that have heavily recruited from the military in recent years include GE, Home Depot, Lowe's, State Farm Insurance, Merck, and Bank of America.

It's not really surprising to see companies turn to the military for leadership potential. A long tradition of books and seminars advises leaders to think like military leaders ranging from Sun Tzu to Norman Schwarzkopf. And military veterans do have a variety of valuable skills learned through experience. General David Petraeus notes, "Tell me anywhere in the business world where a 22- or 23-year-old is responsible for 35 or 40 other individuals on missions that involve life and death . . . They're under enormous scrutiny, on top of everything else. These are pretty formative experiences. It's a bit of a crucible-like experience that they go through." Military leaders are also used to having to make do in less than optimal conditions, negotiate

across cultures, be highly accountable, and operate under extreme stress.

However, they do have to relearn some lessons from the service. Some may not be used to leading someone like an eccentric computer programmer who works strange hours, dresses like a slob, but brings more to the company's bottom line than a conventional employee. Indeed, in some companies like Google, there is nothing like the chain of command military leaders are used to. Still, most forecasts suggest there will be an ample supply of battle-tested military leaders ready to report for corporate duty in the near future, and many companies are eager to have them.

Questions

12-14. Do you think leaders in military contexts exhibit the same qualities as organizational leaders? Why or why not?

★ **12-15.** In what ways not mentioned in the case would military leadership lessons *not* apply in the private sector? What might military leaders have to relearn to work in business?

12-16. Are specific types of work or situations more likely to benefit from the presence of "battle-tested" leaders? List a few examples.

Sources: B. O'Keefe, J. Birger, and D. Burke, "Battle Tested," *Fortune* (March 22, 2010), p. 108–118; B. Whitmore, "Hiring Military Veterans Is Good Business," *Huntington WV Herald-Dispatch* (November 6, 2010), www.herald-dispatch.com; B. Wansink, C. R. Payne, and K. van Ittersum, "Profiling the Heroic Leader: Empirical Lessons from Combat-Decorated Veterans of World War II," *Leadership Quarterly* 19, no. 5 (2008), pp. 547–555; and T. E. Ricks, "What Ever Happened to Accountability?" *Harvard Business Review* (October 2012), pp. 93–100.